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ABSTRACT

Magnet schools differ from other forms of alternative schools in being specifically intended to assist school systems in their desegregation efforts. Magnet schools have been defined by the federal courts as those having a "distinctive program of study" designed to attract a cross section of students from all racial groups voluntarily. Several magnet school programs have been federally funded since 1972 and have contributed to efforts at desegregation, though none has completely resolved segregation problems on its own. Magnet schools stimulate, involve, and attract parents, students, and teachers, can serve as models for the rest of their districts to emulate, and depend on outstanding principals. Unfortunately, magnet schools can be more expensive, be divisive, seem elitist, serve as pawns in court battles, draw outstanding teachers out of other programs, and may fail to affect significant numbers of students. Careful planning is necessary to make magnet schools effective and alleviate parent and community concerns, and the growing literature on magnet schools may offer some assistance in such efforts. (PGD)

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MAGNET SCHOOLS

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MAGNET SCHOOLS

Magnet schools demonstrate once again the limitations of any one approach to resolving racial segregation. This is not to condemn the idea, but to state the obvious; there are no precise, definitive answers to the segregation/desegregation issue. It also seems clear that we had better stick to the term desegregation rather than integration since the latter is a fine goal to aim toward but much more difficult to achieve.

In attempting to define magnet schools, it is helpful to distinguish them from the many alternative schools that have existed for many years as well as more recent versions. An alternative school is just that. It is an effort to provide some choice for parents within a public school system. Alternatives have been with us for many years, and range from the fundamentalist approach to a variety of nontraditional schools emphasizing either the arts, science, technology, academic honors, or careers. It is also true that magnet schools may have such features, but the basic difference is that a magnet school in today's parlance is designed to assist school systems in their desegregation efforts.

Magnet schools have been defined by the federal courts as those having a "distinctive program of study" designed to attract a cross section of students from all racial groups voluntarily. Consequently, in designing a proposal for a grant, the magnet schools must distinguish their program from that of the other schools in the system. This means that in

addition to a special curriculum, there must be evidence that the school is racially mixed and part of a desegregation plan. A voluntary, open enrollment plan is necessary to all students and must attract significant numbers of students.

With the passage of the Emergency School Aid Act in June, 1972 a number of magnet school programs received federal funding. Such programs have contributed in many cases to the effort to desegregate school systems. "Contributed" is the key word. In no case, to my knowledge, can any urban school system make the claim successfully that a magnet school plan by itself has accomplished desegregation of the entire system.

What are the strengths of this voluntary approach to desegregation?

- A well designed magnet school stimulates parents and students interested in a different approach to learning.
- It requires a high degree of parent and community involvement.
- It is "busing in" rather than "busing out."
- It provides incentive for teachers and administrators.
- It can help to produce change in the other schools of a school district.
- It alleviates racial segregation.

The above characteristics of the magnet school have the potential of making possible an effective school along the lines described by Ron Edmonds and others in recent times. For a magnet school to be effective, it requires an outstanding principal who then becomes part of the magnet's attraction.

It should establish positive expectations of all the students coming to it. It must create a healthy, exciting, but orderly school climate that attracts attention to anyone visiting and those attending. It should become a source of pride for the community and insist upon parental and community involvement. Clearly, any school with such qualities is going to be strongly supported, but a magnet is designed to effect desegregation.

What are the weaknesses of a magnet school?

- They tend to be more expensive.
- They can be and have been divisive.
- They can be used as a holding action in the litigation struggles that relate to desegregation and serve to avoid actions to desegregate.
- They require high quality staffing that usually necessitates transfer of outstanding teachers from other schools.
- They affect too few students in most cases.
- They often are presented and implemented in ways that insult minorities and become elitist in approach.

The literature on magnet schools is growing. A summary is provided in a Phi Delta Kappa fastback entitled "Magnet Schools: An Approach to Voluntary Desegregation" by Charles McMillan. Maryann Dorgan and Muriel Carrison have written articles critical of magnet schools in Integrateducation, Volume 18, January-August 1980, and Principal, Volume 60, January 1981. Positive presentations have been made by

Daniel Levine of the University of Missouri in several publications, by Robert Barr in the January 1, 1982 issue of Principal, and by school administrators in those cities offering magnet schools. My own experience with magnet schools has been more positive than negative. This includes my evaluation of such efforts as the Park East High School in East Harlem, approaches made by the Educational Collaborative of Greater Boston focusing on the City of Boston, and two magnet schools established and currently functioning in Stamford, Connecticut where I was Superintendent of Schools from 1975-1980.

Much of the success of a magnet school depends upon demographics. The larger the city and the higher percentage of minorities make any significant impact more difficult to achieve. In Stamford between 1974 and 1981, two schools that were approximately 95% minority have become 60% minority in one case and 50% in the other. This was not achieved without difficulty. One of the most serious problems and one likely to occur is that there is usually insufficient space to house all students who live in the magnet school neighborhood. Consequently, some neighborhood children must be assigned to nearby schools but not actually in their own neighborhood. It is also true that the appeal of the magnet school to those minority families living in the neighborhood is more related to neighborhood appeal than magnet appeal. Presenting arguments for establishing magnet schools often arouses sensitivities of minority families, of staff not associated

with the magnet schools, and of other interest groups who see money going to support magnet schools that could be directed to their concerns.

Recognizing that opposition is certain to arise, careful planning of a magnet school is essential. Time taken to accomplish this is worthwhile, even though it often produces frustration and disagreement. Involving those affected, neighborhood parents and leaders, teachers, administrators and Board of Education members helps to achieve the support needed for approval of the plan. This effort, supplemented by clear, jargonless description of the school in public press releases, and in school newsletters should lead to acceptance. In the last analysis, success will depend on consistently high level performance of staff. Actions nearly always prove more powerful than words.

In conclusion, in the necessary efforts devoted to desegregating school systems, magnet schools have limited chances of succeeding over a long period of time. Nonetheless, if carefully planned, they do make a contribution.